Hilna Af Klint at The Guggenheim: Metaphysics at it Patrols Mortality’s Borders

by Ekin Erkan

The Guggenheim’s spring retrospective of the seminal Swedish painter, Hilma Af Klint, has, naturally, evoked a multitude of art critics and visual culture scholars who laud her radical abstraction which, at the beginning of the 20th century, preceded Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian. Yet, where much attention has been given to the symbology and motifs riddling Klint’s work - bold, private, untethered and nonrepresentational as they are - there has been a modicum of nuanced thought on how, exactly, esotericism and theology fomented Klint’s pedagogical projects. Jillian Steinhauer, for instance, has underscored Klint’s naturalistic watercolors; featuring flowers and lifelike drawings of women; *Summer Landscape* (1888) suggests Klint’s technical aptitude for rendering light. Jadranka Ryle, in a clever article titled "Reinventing the Yggdrasil," invokes Klint's motif of the Yggdrasil, or the holy tree of Norse mythology, as a political axle for Nordic romanticism. Ryle makes the claim that by redirecting the Yggdrasil towards androgynous abstraction, Klint's engagement with Norse mythology subverts the nationalist and patriarchal romanticism that previously characterized the nineteenth century’s use of the Yggdrasil. Others have adroitly uncovered biographical fragments from Klint’s life, detailing how she and four friends formed De Fem ("the Five"), an exclusively female coven that met weekly, praying, meditating, and holding seances to commune with spiritual guides. Rather than poise the Swedish maverick within the cannon of abstraction qua a political praxis, feminist subject-being, or historiography – projects that have been exhaustively overwrought, to the point of rendering Klint’s work both mute and reductively technical– I would like to take this time to closely examine simply one of Klint’s paintings and foreground it as an axiomatic modernist injunction between metaphysics and epistemology.

Indeed, the painting I would like to invoke is *The Swan No. 17* (1915)[[1]](#footnote-1) for it is here where we can trace Klint the (occluded) esoteric philosopher. The paintings comprising the "swan series" are progressively self-referential - with *The Swan No. 17*, we see a glowing, dusty orange color field, suggesting a quiet slow burn. A series of bisected single-palette semicircles trace Klint's previous "swans," each of which was far more representationally bound than the last. In the center of *The* *Swan no. 17* one can barely make out a meager orange and black triangle. This triangle is, of course, no triangle at all. It repeatedly reappears as a pyramid – Klint’s motif par excellence - with Klint's “Paintings for the Temple” series (1906-1915), which eventually comprised 193 works. In *The* *Swan No.17,* this pyramid is but a covert and subtle central adage, reminiscent of Klint's uncompromising and vigorous theosophy.

One of Klint’s later engagements with the “swan” motif - a series that found Klint increasingly dissociating the “representative swan” (or that which appears or suggests a literal swan) from its qualitative being (that which is “swan-like”) – this painting autonomizes color (black, white) and geometric form (bisected circles), while repudiating indexical existential markers of environment and object, i.e. gradation or tone.[[2]](#footnote-2) The junction of metaphysics and epistemology is marked by the intersection of two threads: the epistemological thread that divides sapience (understood here as noetic “intelligence”) from sentience and the metaphysical thread that distinguishes the reality of the concept from the reality of the object.[[3]](#footnote-3) This metaphysical thread is inherently that of the occult, as it follows the liquidation of the “in-itself”: Klint’s swan is rendered unapparent, devoid of feathers, a beak or any such categorical traces. Thus, any good zoologist, gazing peculiarly at Klint’s “swan,” may wheeze and jest: “this is but no Swan at all.” The bourgeois art-observer, at this point accustomed to the Modernisms of Baudelaire, Flaubert, or Manet, all of which render disinhibition as it is calculable,[[4]](#footnote-4) would eschew Klint’s swan, bedaubed in ontological incontinence.

What we have in the case of Klint’s abstracted “swan” is the kind of causality whereby the protentions of noetic souls (projective “imagining”) converge within what Kant called the “transcendental affinity” between noesis (intellectual activity, proper) and the world. Lyotard conceived of the history of modern and contemporary art as starting from the category of the sublime rather than the beautiful, or the confrontation of the experience of excess, as what "surpasses not just the understanding but the imagination itself."[[5]](#footnote-5) This is very much the case in Klint’s *Swan no. 17* – a gargantuan, towering painting; Klint's pictorial progressions, schematic and cryptic, often stretched as tall as ten feet. While *Swan no. 17* is not quite as cosmic, it is one of Klint’s more primordial works, unconcerned with beauty. Indeed, Klint evokes the kind of idolization reminiscent of the spectator’s own mortality – thus, natural and biological forms lapse into evanescence, as they are shaken loose, ousted, and reconstituted with a bare, albeit undeniably humanistic, geometry.

This is, of course, also concomitant with the experience of an "irreducible madness," the same kind of “madness” that riddled the task of what Klint called her "great commission," or serving as a spiritual medium through which guides would paint "through her" until she was needed no more. In this sense, Klint’s calling was that of a spiritual laborer, hence her prolific output, most of which was intended not to be publicly exhibited until her death. Once more, we are reminded of the sublime’s irrevocable and unsavory relationship with the edges of transience and death.

Slavoj Žižek points to the sublime "as an attempt to schematize the Ideas of Reason themselves; the Sublime confronts us with the failure of imagination, with that which remains forever an a priori un-imaginable - and it is here that we encounter the subject qua the void of negativity."[[6]](#footnote-6) This "inherent madness" or the excesses of subjectivity is what makes "schema," or in Klint’s case, schematization possible. Consider Klint as a devoted muse, rather than Klint the auteur; thus, the data of intuition facilitates a connection to the artwork as it can experience interpassivity. This interpassivity - the floating spirit, the ethereal gesture - is not only what foregrounds Klint's work but, also, what explicitly distinguishes her particular intervention with Modernity. For a brief moment, let us linger on this most farcical exchange between the late Michel Serres and Simon Critchley (the Alain de Botton west of the Atlantic):

*Critchley*: "Coming from a background in phenomenology, I'd like to ask you about you relationship with modernity."

*Serres*: "Maternity! Why do you ask me about that?"[[7]](#footnote-7)

Modernity-as-maternity, or the artist as suffocating projective reasoning, deliverance (utility) yet stilted, is, in my opinion, the central premise of Klint’s painting and its engagement with theology. Thus, it is frustrated. This is, at its core, a theology of the feminine, proper: the splitting of Jocasta as *miasma* and *agos* without Oedipus (a framework), who would serve as *pharmakos*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Most critically, Klint’s pledge of interpassivity is not simply a feature of abstraction – it is the injunction of theology-as-metaphysics with pedagogy-as-noesis. That is, without Klint’s ethereal praxis – something that lies both outside the domain of full comprehension (Theosophy is not stilted by Abrahamic doctrine, after all) – her work would be more fit for the reductive classification of abstraction. Therefore, it is simply inadequate to consider Klint as an experimental geometrician, or as a technician, as those art critics who extol Klint as a prescient forebearer to Kandinsky and company would have us believe.

If, as psychologist William James tells us "to be sagacious is to be a good observer,"[[9]](#footnote-9) Klint is an unabashed blaspheme; perhaps, therefore, we simply ought not approach Klint’s swan with any dignity in mind. This is, of course, why any logician or generic epistemologist worth their salt ought to be revolted by Klint's very suggestion of a “Swan.” James retells that in the ages when man believed in the occult influences of the heavenly bodies, it might have been unphilosophical to omit ascertaining the precise condition of the position of the planets/their alliance at the moment of the scientific (or philosophical) experiment. Thus, Klint's Theosophy is outside theology. For consider even when theology laid claim to both mankind's Universe and Copernicus’s new astronomy (1543). This conceptual space provided a context for the biological sciences of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to become increasingly institutionalized, making it possible for science (Darwin's epistemological rupture) to challenge Christianity’s biblical marcro-origins story. Thus, the-cosmogonically projected and divinely created could divide between an ostensibly generically Christian mankind (on the one hand) and all other species, i.e. “Swans” (on the other). Klint's nonsensical parody of an imperatively self-correcting theology exposes that even the natural biological sciences must be taken into account within the aporias of their Janus-faced biocentric humanness. That is, Klint's swan weaves, as Sylvia Wynter deems it, both bios and mythoi, or, as Franz Fanon termed it, “phlogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny” as the hypothesis-definition of "what it is to be human."[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the series of swans - with each consequent swan growing increasingly disinterested with the world’s mold, each swan shedding yet one more indexical feather - we are allotted a glimpse of Klint’s impossible project: to create a temple fit for the gods. Though self-conscious, this is but no vanity project – Klint’s self-consciousness cannot be simply described in terms of an identity relation, but only in terms of “identity maps.” Rather than tautologically referring to itself, the formal ‘I am I’, Klint’s comsomological reverie cartographically transforms the swan of the world to the swan of the mind. Klint ushers the swan from the perspective of its dual reality into a radical otherness. To this day, Klint’s swan is not of this world, or any world. Nonetheless, in order to determinately establish the truth of itself, Klint’s painting not only attempts to render the unrestricted world intelligible, thus her spiritual penchant, but also to expand the order of intelligibilities that is “reality in its excess.” This excess, seen through the lens of the intelligible, and not as purely occult excess, is the very key for rethinking, reimagining and reinventing intelligence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This is altogether unique from how Dada established the vanity of bourgeois morality by teaching the emptiness of the beautiful, submitted to the lies of the "true and the just" which had simply become alibis of the crimes committed at the time (WWI). Thus, I maintain that it is but an injustice to evoke Klint through a political prism, as we would readily engage in with a Surrealist painter. For Klint’s swan reveals an existential Modernist tenet that exposes Kantian correlationism’s slide from epistemological sobriety into alterity. Klint’s challenge, to wield the spiritual forces (as she painted nearly two hundred works in a manner that she characterized as “medial”), was unmet in kind of Abstraction that followed. Thus, to imagine Klint-qua-Kandinsky is, with equal force, a similar crime. Rather, the contemporary spectator is met with a new challenge: to hold the metaphysical thread while learning how to reconnect it to the epistemological thread. For, just as epistemology without metaphysics is empty, metaphysics without epistemology is blind.

Klint evinces a pure kind of metaphysics: her work proceeds as though physics already existed. Hence, Klint works with readily placed constrictions of physical bounds and geometric suppositions, of recurrent color schemas: *Swan no. 17* rests upon Klint’s previous swans. As Badiou notes, the advantage of the metaphysics is that we can immediately see the subjective forms of life that the materialist dialectic lays claim to, the forms of a “subject-of-truth”. Klint's swan is plucked from its earthly strata, from any representational norm or biological vantage. Klint’s swan is that of metaphysics proper, and, more generally, her unequivocal and singular praxis as a metaphysical painter. The very absence of any central theosophical doctrine in Klint's writing, practice, or work is what indexes her fundamental thesis: freedom is not social, or aesthetic, but fatal; freedom is, therefore, *not* intelligent. This is a world where swans no longer fly, croon, or float upon crystalline lakes; even more interesting, Klint’s swans are not subject to Tchaikovsky's sorcerer-curse, or destined for death. Klint’s swans are radiant, foregrounded by the sun’s glow, as they are the borders of life. Unwilling to compromise with the world to which it is determinately bound, Klint's swan points us towards the stars and ethereal heavens, of which it knows nothing and most earnestly admits of knowing nothing. Thus is Klint’s human touch – the scent of frustration; to simply call this “abstraction” would be folly.



1. *The Swan*. *No. 17* from the SUW/UW series - oil on canvas; 59 3/10” × 59 2/5”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In stark contrast to *The Swan No. 1* (1915) or *The Swan No. 9* (1915), for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ray Brassier*, Concepts and Objects*, in Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek & Graham Harman (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbournce: re.press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The most obvious example of this is the classic study of Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), often lionized as the first work of Modernist visual art due to its deliberate engagement with historical reflexivity vis-à-vis Titian’s *Venus* (1538), measured in its appropriation (i.e. Manet’s prostitute and her besmirched fingers, arousing smile, and sensual hand, as it cups her pelvis). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean-François Lyotard as paragraphed in Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 181 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1999), 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As recounted by Jim Flint in *Michel Serres' Angels, a Modern Myth* (Analogue City: 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here I recall Tristan Garcia, who reminds us that “[t]he construction of this genderedness through domination leads to schizophrenic subjectivities. Every woman is trapped in a femininity that both prevents her from being herself and allows her to be herself. Woman’s negation of her gender in order to access equality leads to an identification with man, established as a gender which is more than a gender (a species-gender)….Beauvoir describes woman, characterised as the second sex, as less, as relative, as incomplete, as particular, as closer to nature, as more corrupted and more corrupting, who is other. In short, woman is simply reduced to being a particular gender, while man is not only a gender, but the universal gender.” *Form and Object* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 274 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 709. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future* (Durhan, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Reza Negarestani, *Intelligence and Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)